



# Pride in Place: Tackling Incivilities

## Case Study: Bredhurst Woodland Action Group

Bredhurst





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Written by Ekosgen Consultants

Photographs courtesy of Bredhurst Woodland Action Group

We would like to thank all those involved in producing this case study. Firstly, we would like to thank Ekosgen for carrying out the research which has informed the case study, and writing the case study report. Secondly we would like to thank our external Reference Group for their valuable advice and guidance on the case study content. Finally, we would like to sincerely thank all of those involved with Bredhurst Woodland Action Group for offering their time, support, and materials to enable this case study to be produced. The contribution of all of those listed here is greatly appreciated, and we extend our gratitude to them.



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## The Challenge

Situated on the North Downs, six miles north of Maidstone in Kent, Bredhurst Woods is one of the largest woodlands in the protected Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Despite being designated a Local Wildlife Site, the landscape and bio-diversity of Bredhurst Hurst woods were being irreparably destroyed by commercial-scale fly-tipping and the illegal use of 4x4s and off-road activities. Following years of illegal activities, the woods had become virtually off-limits to walkers, horse riders and the wider community. Those who did venture in were faced with fly-tipping, numerous burnt-out cars and impassable paths. The main source of the problem was a byway that cut through the centre of the woodland, which allowed off-road vehicles and fly-tippers easy access to the entire area.



## The Response

Bredhurst Woodland Action Group (BWAG) was formed in May 2005 and was approved as a Registered Charity in 2008. Volunteers have cleared the woods of over 100 tonnes of fly-tipping and in 2008 and 2009, the Royal Engineers restored many paths in the woodland, giving their manpower and machinery free of charge. Vehicular access to the woodland has been restricted by an experimental scheme not seen anywhere else in Kent. Now that the woodland is in a state of recovery, BWAG is continuing to work to improve the habitat to allow wildlife to flourish, ensuring that future generations can enjoy the ancient woodland.



## How it worked

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- The Group was formed by six local residents who had become fed-up with the degradation of the woods. Initially, it acted as an Advisory Committee to the Parish Council but as the Group's role and remit evolved, it became a registered charity in 2008.
- In the beginning, BWAG concentrated its efforts on clearing fly-tipping and renovating paths and bridleways, opening up the woods for the wider community to use and enjoy. BWAG's activities subsequently evolved into active woodland management and conservation, as well as organising a programme of nature related events throughout the year.
- Community-led from the start, BWAG's success is partly attributable to engaging with, and securing support from, the wider community and key organisations such as the Kent Wildlife Trust, the Kent Downs AONB Unit, Kent County Council and even the Royal Engineers, who are based nearby.
- The physical transformation of the woods is the most obvious way in which BWAG has made an impact. Not only has the rubbish been cleared, but sensitive management practices have restored the structural diversity of its habitat and flora and fauna are now flourishing. BWAG has also been credited with bringing the local village together, developing the skills of its members and volunteers and increasing their knowledge of wildlife as well as that of visitors.
- BWAG has been successful because it had a strong, committed and passionate Chair who was able to inspire volunteers, the village and key organisations to get involved. Press and media coverage has been important, as has not giving up in the face of major challenges and adversities.
- Over the longer-term, BWAG would like Bredhurst Woods to be in community ownership and is exploring ways in which it can purchase the individual plots which make up the woods. More immediately, it is currently revising the original Woodland Management Plan (which was drawn up in 2006 by Kent Wildlife Trust on behalf of BWAG), which will direct the next stage in the restoration of the woods.

# Background to the project

Situated on the North Downs, six miles north of Maidstone in Kent, Bredhurst Woods is one of the largest woodlands in the protected Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It comprises three separate woods, which together cover an area of 600 acres of ancient woodland. Despite being designated a Local Wildlife Site (formerly SNCI), local press reports show that the landscape, and bio-diversity of Bredhurst Hurst woods in particular, were being irreparably destroyed by commercial-scale fly-tipping and the illegal use of 4x4s and off-road activities.

According to the Project Leader, vehicles were *'carving tracks through the woods making the whole area little more than a mud bath,'* and trees were being cut down, some of which had stood for hundreds of years.

Following years of illegal activities, the woods had become virtually off-limits to walkers, horse riders, and the wider community. Those who did venture in were faced with fly-tipping, numerous burnt-out cars and impassable paths. The main source of the problem was a byway that cut through the centre of the woodland, which allowed off-road vehicles and fly tippers easy access to the entire area.

In May 2005, a meeting was held at the Parish Council to find a way of saving the woods. The six members attending the first meeting decided to form the Bredhurst Woodland Action Group (BWAG) and Vanessa Jones was appointed its Chair. BWAG acted as an Advisory Committee to the Parish Council, giving it a legitimacy which proved helpful when liaising with local authorities and other organisations.

Very quickly, BWAG secured support from the local community - it obtained 1,500 signatures to a petition demanding Bredhurst Woods be saved.

*'The area was a magnet for undesirables.'*

*Local Resident*

(Quite an achievement, given that there are only 330 residents in Bredhurst village. Signatures were gathered from surrounding villages, visitors to the area,

and people with connections to the area). The Group also secured support from the local MP, Kent County Council, and key organisations that would become integral to supporting the work of BWAG and a major factor underpinning its achievements.

*'The woods had become an intimidating place.'*

*Local Resident*

## What the project does

The original aim of BWAG was to rescue the ancient woodland. A year after its formation, in April 2006, BWAG organised its first fly-tipping clearance day. It secured support from over 60 volunteers. With tractors and trailers provided by locals, approximately 100 tonnes of rubbish were removed. BWAG provided lunch in the community hall and this turned into its first community event. BWAG's Chair also negotiated with Maidstone Borough Council to remove the rubbish free of charge the following day.

Whilst the logistics of organising a clearance day were challenging enough, before any work could begin, BWAG had to trace the landowners of Bredhurst Hurst. This was one of the most difficult challenges BWAG had to overcome, as in the late 1960s, Bredhurst Woods was split into 139 separate plots and sold off individually. The Land Registry provided information on ownership, but this did not always resolve the issue. It took time, hard work, patience and dedication for the Group to establish that there were 104 separate owners. BWAG has successfully located around 80 of the owners and the vast majority have given BWAG permission to go onto their land to remove fly-tipping and to carry out maintenance work.

Following a second fly-tipping clearance day in 2006, BWAG spent the next few years implementing a Woodland Management Plan. Produced on its behalf by Kent Wildlife Trust, the Plan identified the work necessary to revitalise the woods and to improve the conditions for wildlife.

Key activities included scrub clearance, coppicing, which allows more natural light into the area (increasing perceptions of safety amongst those using the woods and also encouraging more diverse ground flora), erecting fences and installing kissing gates and horse gates to prevent inappropriate access to footpaths and

bridleways. With the help of the locally based Royal Engineers, who provided their manpower and machinery for free, extensive path restoration was undertaken in 2008 and 2009.

Importantly, in 2007, an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) was introduced following advice from an officer at Kent County Council. This restricts vehicular access to the woods. Both ends of the byway are gated and only landowners and people granted permits by Kent County Council have access. This unique scheme (not seen elsewhere in Kent) has been successful partly because it is enforced by the Police who have, on occasion, confiscated vehicles that were in the woods illegally, attracting considerable press attention and sending a clear signal that the woods are now being cared for. The success of the closure means that it has now been made permanent.



With the woodland showing clear signs of recovery, the activities of BWAG changed in response. The Monthly Task Days that used to focus on clearing rubbish now focus on woodland management and conservation. The primary



aim of the Group is promoting the woodland ecosystem and restoring its habitat and structural diversity. BWAG is also seeking to promote the enjoyment of the woods amongst the local community, as well as further afield. To this end, it organises a programme of nature walks and activities led by experts in their field. BWAG also organises two extremely popular social events a year: the Bluebell Walk and Cream Tea in April and the Christmas Carol Concert. The group communicates and promotes its activities via its website.

The social events are one way in which BWAG raises funding for its activities. In 2011, the Carol Concert raised £1,100 and the Bluebell Walk raised £1,500. BWAG also raises funds by selling various products, such as carved wooden mushrooms, logs and bird boxes, which have been made from the wood felled as part of the coppicing works.

BWAG launched a membership scheme in 2006. Initially introduced to demonstrate to funding organisations that its activities are supported by the wider community, this generates a small, yet steady stream of income. The membership scheme appears to have given funders

comfort that BWAG is addressing local needs, and has helped it secure funding. Just as important as the grants, however, are the donations and the in-kind support given by many individuals, public and community organisations, as well as local businesses.

As the role and remit of BWAG evolved and it started to raise significant amounts of revenue to support its work, it changed from being an Advisory Committee to the Parish Council in 2008 and became a registered charity. The Group has raised over £110,000 since it was founded in 2005, and had an income of c.£25,000 in 2010/11.



## Plans for the future

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Over the longer term, BWAG would like Bredhurst Woods to be in community ownership and is exploring ways in which it can purchase the individual plots. The Group believe that taking ownership of the woods would be a significant step, enabling them to overcome the threats and barriers to effective woodland management associated with the current fragmented ownership structure.

More immediately, at a strategic level, BWAG and KWT are currently revising the Woodland Management Plan. Whereas the original plan addressed the issues that were responsible for the degradation of the woods, the revised Plan will direct the next stage in the restoration of the woods. By setting out the long-term objectives to maintain and enhance the woodland habitat, the Plan will inform future conservation decisions and influence the direction of future volunteer task days. The Plan will also highlight future funding opportunities, as well as ways in which to encourage further educational and vocational access.

On a day-to-day basis, BWAG is constantly developing and organising activities available to members and non-members to ensure their motivation and interest is maintained.

Specific activities for the coming year include:

- Further coppicing to improve the habitat;
- Continue selling a small range of wood products to generate an income;
- Continue to explore the option of buying plots as and when they become available;
- Continue organising events to maintain interest of members and non members;
- Consider how the woods could be used in more educational projects in future;
- Producing leaflets and installing way-marking throughout the site, hopefully giving people even more confidence to explore the site. This work is being funded by a Big Lottery grant of £10,000 that BWAG received in 2011.



## Community involvement and leadership

From the start, BWAG has been community-led. The impetus to form the group came from residents in Bredhurst village who had become fed-up with the negative impact that the destruction of the woods was having on the village and its quality of life. From a group of six, membership grew rapidly and there are currently over 350 members. The Group has adopted a more formal structure, led by a Board of Trustees chosen annually at the AGM.

However, formal membership is only one indicator of the support that BWAG receives from the local community. Its monthly task days now attract up to 30 volunteers, whilst local businesses show support by donating major prizes at the annual big raffle. BWAG is also dependent on the wider support of the village; a dedicated group of volunteers, for example, doing the cooking and baking for the social events, whilst other individuals make their homes available for events and meetings.

There has been a high level of community support and involvement in BWAG. From its inception, it was able to attract support very quickly precisely because most

people wanted something to be done about the degradation of the woods, but hadn't necessarily wanted to initiate the process themselves. This wasn't a controversial idea, with most villagers appreciating the potential impact it could have on their quality of life. Inclusivity is a core principle by which BWAG abides. It seeks to cater to the needs of all, recognising that people wish to support the Group in various ways. Some give time, others make donations, and show their support by attending events.



## Project achievements and impact

BWAG's most obvious achievement has been the physical transformation of Bredhurst Woods. No longer the eyesore it once was, renovation of the site has led to a number of other impacts. The number of people using and visiting the woods has increased dramatically.

BWAG monitors the number of people attending the events it organises and can demonstrate an increase in visitor numbers – this year the annual Bluebell Walk and cream tea is being held over two days rather than one, due to growing demand. Usage has not only increased amongst the local community, but it draws in visitors from much further afield, encouraging people to be active in the countryside. Some attend organised nature walks, whilst others just want a stroll on the weekend.

*'On the weekends, the woods have become really busy – attracting families as well.'*

*Local volunteer*

The impact on the habitat and structural diversity of the woods has been considerable. Sensitive tree management, together with the creation of glades and the widening of rides, has helped create valuable habitats for the increasingly-diverse flora and fauna. Rare species can now be found (eg the Adonis Blue Butterfly). As a result, organisations such as the Kent Wildlife Trust, Kent Ornithological Group and many others, regularly undertake surveys of the flora, birds and mammals that can be found in the woods with, for example, 41 species of moth recorded in 2009. As well as the wildlife benefits, BWAG's work has contributed to community cohesion in the area. There is agreement amongst the local community that BWAG has helped bring the village together.

As one resident said:

*'I've been in the village 20 years and village life can be lonely. But BWAG has changed all that... I know a lot more people and we've all made more friends, that wouldn't have happened without BWAG.'*

*Local resident*

Strengthening community cohesion has clearly been a key (unintended) outcome of BWAG. Perceptions of community safety have also increased. With coppicing allowing natural light into the woods, residents have overcome their previous fear of the woods being too dark and intimidating to use.

Increasing the knowledge and skills of individuals and the wider community has, perhaps, been one of BWAG's most distinctive impacts. Those volunteering on task days have gained valuable woodland management skills, which can be utilised on an ongoing basis.

Whereas the task days used to be led by the

*'We've all benefited in different ways. We benefit from having a more pleasant environment for dog walking; the muddy pathways have been cleared and the coppicing has made the woods lighter.'*

*Local resident.*

Kent Downs AONB Unit, BWAG trustees have undertaken training and now lead the work themselves. In addition, those attending the very popular nature walks value the knowledge they gain about the woodland habitat, and its flora and fauna.

*‘When I started, I didn’t know anything about woodland management.’*  
*Local volunteer*

Other indicators of BWAG’s success include:

- Winning KCC’s Awards for Volunteering Excellence’ (Environmental Category) in 2006 and the Kent Calor Village of the Year (Environmental Category) in 2008.
- Being awarded Grassroots Certificate of Merit in 2009 in recognition of its achievements;
- Being filmed by ARD, a German TV company who visited Bredhurst Woods in 2008 and filmed BWAG volunteers at work. The programme was screened in Germany;

- Identified as a model of good practice by KWT as an example of how community groups can have an impact on local conservation;
- Being asked to give presentations and seminars at conferences including the Natural Connections conference in 2011.





## Reasons for project successes and lessons learnt

The success of BWAG can be attributed to three principal factors: leadership, common purpose and an ethos of inclusivity. The Chair of BWAG has been inspirational – persuading organisations and individuals to get involved – and highly effective in co-ordinating and delegating tasks and drawing in appropriate expertise when required.

Partnership working has also been important. The Group works with a variety of organisations, but relationships with two organisations stand out in particular. The partnership with Kent Downs AONB Unit was formed early on in the Group's activities. The Unit has been extremely supportive, helping identify funding the Group could access, providing support with some minor work and generally, giving guidance to a group *'who knew what it wanted to achieve, but did not know how to get started.'* – Chair of BWAG

The KWT has also played a prominent role in the success of BWAG. The Trust has overseen the restoration of the woods, produced the first Woodland Management Plan, and made available tools necessary for management tasks, ranging from spades and saws to more sophisticated tools. Having the support of an established and respected wildlife organisation has given the project considerable legitimacy and credibility, which BWAG has found valuable when submitting grant applications and liaising with local authorities, businesses, and landowners.

Finding the right person in key organisations has been one of the most valuable lessons BWAG has learnt. Initially, it found it difficult to access the decision-makers within KCC and stakeholder organisations. Whilst the officers and staff they spoke to were often very sympathetic, they lacked the authority to help them find a way of saving the woods. The breakthrough came when

a local councillor, who was the leader of Kent County Council, visited the woods and gave his wholehearted support to BWAG.

The combination of community action and widespread community support with legislative and enforcement measures (ie the closure of the byway through the woods and enforcement of this by the local police) has led to clear results in tackling one of the major factors contributing to the decline of the woodland.

Two other factors contributing to the success of BWAG include:

- i. obtaining as much publicity as possible for both the problem and the activities being undertaken to address it. BWAG has used the local press and television, as well as taking stands at events – ranging from the village fair to the Kent Show – to promote its work.
- ii. making a long-term commitment to the project, being persistent and dedicated, especially when faced with problems. For example, in the first few years, when kissing gates and fencing had been installed, some of them were damaged or stolen. BWAG immediately installed replacements or carried out repairs and put up signs throughout the area asking people to report any damage or suspicious activity.

And as the woods came to be used more and more, it was noted that:

*'...gradually the community began to take ownership and responsibility for the area and users all started to look out for illegal activities.'*  
Volunteer

## Advice to other communities

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1. Seek press and media coverage as much as possible to attract people to your cause.
2. Obtain support from decision-makers within public / stakeholder organisations and harness the knowledge within partner organisations.
3. Work in partnership with as many organisations as you can, and think creatively - beyond the usual suspects - about who could help you achieve your aims.
4. Form a core team with different, complementary skills.
5. Be prepared to work very hard, making a long-term commitment to the project as results can take time to occur.
6. Be as inclusive as possible, whilst also recognising and responding to diverse set of needs.

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#### Websites

<http://www.bwag.org.uk/index.php>

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September 2012



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